DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 631 RC 022 404

AUTHOR	Bailey, Jon
TITLE	The Case for Small Schools. A Special Series from the Center for Rural Affairs Monthly Newsletter.
INSTITUTION	Center for Rural Affairs, Walthill, NE.
PUB DATE	2000-01-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Center for Rural Affairs, P.O. Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067. Tel: 402-846-5428. For full text: http://www.cfra.org/Small_schools.htm.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - General (020)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Educational Attainment; *Educational Environment; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Public Policy; Rural Schools; School Community Relationship; *School Size; *Small Schools; *Student School Relationship

ABSTRACT

This document compiles a series of articles from the Center for Rural Affairs monthly newsletter, January-August 1999. The series responds to public statements of some legislators, urban school board members, and others about the need to eliminate small rural schools because of their "inefficiency." Seven short articles discuss various aspects and effects of small size. The first three examine advantages of small schools compared to large schools: less crime and violence, fewer discipline problems, lower student tardiness and absenteeism, and less substance abuse and tobacco use by students; lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates; and higher and more varied extracurricular participation, which promotes academic success, better attendance, positive attitudes toward school, and enhanced social behavior. The themes of the other four articles are as follows: (1) Although state legislators often believe that school consolidation will save money, research has identified negative economic, social, and political effects of consolidation on rural communities; (2) In the aftermath of the violence at Columbine High School, it appeared that few people associated with the large school knew anything about the two murderers; (3) While urban educators are jumping on the small school bandwagon--opening new high schools and splitting existing ones into schools within a school--public policy in many states continues to promote a financing system that punishes small rural schools; and (4) Twenty-two major studies failed to show that larger schools had higher student achievement than smaller schools, and small schools in Nebraska and Vermont have performed as well or better than their larger counterparts. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 441 631

The Case for Small Schools

A special series from the Center for Rural Affairs monthly newsletter

Jon Bailey
Center for Rural Affairs

January 2000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jon M. Bailey
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

RC022404

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Case for Small Schools

A special series from the Center for Rural Affairs monthly newsletter

Jon Bailey, January 2000

Introduction

The *Small Schools* series of articles began as a response to the public statements of some legislators, metropolitan school board members, and others about the need to eliminate small, rural schools. They said small schools are "inefficient," and take away too many resources (i.e., public aid to education) from deserving larger schools.

One thing, however, is abundantly clear from this series: For most children, smaller schools are better. In that respect, this series of articles advocates not only for small, rural schools, but for all children. As a society we have the opportunity to provide a safer and higher quality of educational experience for our children, and the tragic recent events in America's schools show the necessity to seize the opportunity.

We are providing this series so advocates for small schools can use it to inform state policymakers, local school board members, and school administrators of the advantages of educating children in small schools. For the sake of our children, future generations, and our society, we hope your efforts are successful.

I. Warning! Big Schools May be Hazardous to Your Children

The U.S. Department of Education's report *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97* is revealing. When comparing small schools (less than 300) and big schools (1,000 or more), big schools have:

- 825 percent more violent crime
- 270 percent more vandalism
- 378 percent more theft and larceny
- 394 percent more physical fights or attacks
- 3200 percent more robberies
- 1000 percent more weapons incidents

Further, 52 percent of small school principals report either no discipline or minor discipline problems; only 14 percent of big school principals can report the same. Student tardiness and absenteeism are serious or moderate problems at significantly fewer small schools, and teacher absenteeism and violence toward teachers were five times more likely in big schools. Finally, student alcohol, drug, and tobacco use are all significantly more likely in big schools.

Reasons for these alarming differences are many. The social fabric present in many communities with small schools contributes to a less violent, more social atmosphere. Students are less likely to damage the property of an institution to which they are connected, and the school is one of the institutions that binds together smaller communities. Finally, the developmental stage of concern for parents' feelings when they are not present is strong in communities where, for good or bad, everyone knows your name.

As important are the schools themselves. Small schools are manageable, where administrators know the students and their families, and where disciplinary problems are detected and resolved earlier. Combining safety, superior academic achievement, and graduation rates clearly indicate that smaller, community-oriented schools are in the best interests of our children. As state legislatures and pundits look for ways to enhance school "efficiency" and balance state budgets, we should be mindful of the costs we are asking our children and our future to bear.

Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, January 1999

II. Graduation Rates

Nearly every study of educational attainment finds that small schools, whether measuring graduation or dropout rates, have a significantly greater ability to graduate students than do large schools. Further, data from the U.S. Department of Education show that rural school dropout rates are substantially lower than those in urban areas, and are nearly equal to those in affluent suburban schools despite significant differences in parental income and education levels. Nebraska Department of Education data confirm these findings (see chart that follows).

Comparison of Nebraska Rural and Urban School Graduation Rates

County	No. of Dropouts	Percent of State Total	No. of Graduates	Graduate to Dropout Ratio
Rural (least populated half of NE counties)	130	3.0	2212	17:1
Lancaster (Lincoln, NE)	664	15.1	2223	3.3:1
Douglas (Omaha, NE)	1877	42.7	4605	2.4:1
Sarpy (Omaha suburbs)	136	3.0	1256	9.2:1

Source: Nebraska Department of Education data for 1996, compiled by the Center for Rural Affairs.

How has "inefficient" come to be defined by state policymakers and the media as those school systems that graduate nearly all their students, while significant numbers of large school students never reach the status – high school graduate – that is so highly correlated with income and citizenship? When did educational attainment, one of the historic, hallmark goals of public education, become "inefficient?"

The answer is that policy, often driven by short-sighted budget concerns, has mandated that schools get increasingly bigger and bureaucratic, thus losing much of the virtue of American public education. Since 1940, the number of public schools in the U.S. has declined by 69 percent despite a 70 percent increase in population.

Yet this move toward bigness defies all logic and research. Studies have shown that large school size contributes to increased dropout rates by lowering the quality of school climate, generally composed of variables measuring cohesion, participation in school activities, and interaction with faculty. When students feel like members of a school community, they tend to stay and graduate.

For the future of our children and our communities, policymakers must recognize the educational attainment attributes of small schools rather than enacting policies that penalize those schools already imparting those virtues. The *Vermont Small Schools Group* may have said it best in its recent *Small Schools Report*: "Small schools ... cost more to operate than larger schools, but they are worth the investment because of the value they add to student learning and community cohesion." The cost assertion is debatable, but the worthiness conclusion is undeniable.

Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, March 1999

III. Participation and Belonging

My children and I recently attended the Nebraska Girls State Basketball Tournament to watch our high school compete (3 year enrollment of 65). As we watched, I wondered: where are the students; why aren't they here cheering? Then it dawned on me – they are here, as players, cheerleaders, managers, and band members. And nearly all community members who attended the same school told me they participated in one or more of those roles in high school. One clear message came through: participation in school activities made people feel counted and like they belonged, and that has carried over into an adult feeling of connectedness to their school and community.

Twenty-three research studies found that extracurricular participation rates are higher and more varied in small schools than in large schools, and that alienation from the school environment is lower in small schools. National studies and studies from California, New Jersey, Illinois, and New York have so concluded. The most recent data on school activity participation rates confirm these conclusions.

In nearly every measure, rural students (generally in small schools) equal or exceed the participation rates of all students. These data also confirm an important aspect of participation in small schools – diversity. Mathematically, if nearly all students in a small school participate, these figures suggest that students have to be involved in multiple activities. This is not the case in large schools, where studies have found that the activity offerings may be greater but where the average large school student does not use that variety. Further, large schools are polarizing; large schools generally have a relatively small group of very active students at one end and a large group of nonparticipating students at the other, and these groups are estranged.

Why is participation in school activities important? Research shows participation in extracurricular activities is a significant indicator of academic success; those involved in activities tend to be better students. Participation is often a determinant of attendance and dropout rates; involved students go to and stay in school. As important, is the sense of belonging and connection to the school environment students get from participation. Alienation from the school environment is a bad outcome itself, and is connected with other undesirable outcomes – lack of confidence and self-esteem, lack of responsibility for self-direction, absenteeism and increased dropout rates.

Conversely, participation is highly correlated with positive attitudes and enhanced social behavior. Students who participate feel a part of a school community, have a better

attitude toward the school environment, and, if they remain in the larger community, are likely to carry that attitude toward the school into their adult lives. All available research suggests that small schools are favored significantly over large schools for these desirable outcomes.

Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, April 1999

IV. Consolidation & Community

The North Dakota Legislature recently voted to dedicate a significant portion of surplus state funds to pay school districts to consolidate. According to supporters, the "reorganization bonuses" allow encouragement of "inevitable" consolidation without mandating it and without removing local control. Clearly, the majority view of the North Dakota Legislature is that this program will provide long-run cost savings to the state by closing rural schools.

If consolidation is sold as long-term, statewide cost cutting, it is incumbent for policymakers to consider the other side of the equation. Schools in rural communities have a standing that goes beyond education. Consideration of the long-term social and economic affects of consolidation on communities is imperative. Research has identified three specific consequences:

- **Economic** The relative size of its budget and payroll often makes a school the major "industry" in a rural community. A study of a rural, agricultural town in Nevada that lost a high school through consolidation found an 8 percent decline in retail sales and a 6 percent decline in the labor supply. Schools also maintain residential and commercial property values and increase the available loan capital in a community due to business activity attributable to schools' activities.
- **Social** Community schools bring people together for social activities. A consolidated school may have regional impacts, but the role is diminished in a particular community. Community schools and activities unite people for a common purpose and provide a collective identity to community members.
- **Political** Consolidation shifts control of schools from communities and citizens to state and professional administrators. Centralized decision-making lessens local control over budgets, standards, and curriculum, and thus decreases citizen involvement in the daily operation of schools. Low voter turnout in school-related elections and the lack of school board candidates in many areas are likely results of this disengagement.

When considering the elimination of smaller schools for larger, consolidated schools, the books must be balanced. If and how people live in affected communities is as important as state budget considerations. Communities and state policymakers concerned about the future viability of rural communities would be wise to consider the community functions and impacts of schools.

Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, May 1999

V: Reflections on Columbine

In the days since 13 innocents lost their lives at Columbine High School, the politicians, pundits, and talking heads have developed a long and familiar list of causes: guns, Internet, video games, violent movies, violent music, inattentive parents, inattentive schools, high school culture, and adolescent isolation.

All, no doubt, are contributing factors to children acting in a violent way. With few exceptions, however, school size has not been declared a factor contributing to behavior. This article will not argue that events such as those at Columbine could not occur at a small school; even though data show that violent acts are dramatically rarer at smaller schools, all it takes is one person with access to weapons to create chaos.

Yet in the thousands of print and televised statements concerning Columbine, two were particularly striking. When asked if he knew the two murderers, the principal of Columbine – a school of nearly 2,000 students – responded he did not know their names or anything about them. Several parents of children in an elementary school near Columbine stated they knew nothing about most of the other children in the school, they didn't know their parents, where they lived, or even their names.

These statements could likely be echoed in cities and towns across the nation. Our education policy has come to this: larger, economically "efficient" schools full of strangers that are less schools than educational factories.

In the wake of Columbine, school size must become the topic of great national debate and should top the list of societal factors affecting children. Issues surrounding guns, video games, movies, music, and the Internet are ongoing concerns that have to be addressed. Yet school size, an issue we can effectively address, is likely to have the greatest consequences for our children. We now debate only how to make schools bigger with the hope of saving money.

Paul Theobald, a college Dean of Education, says we "should be building more schools and they should be small." This calls into question the educational model increasingly prevalent in the 20th century. If we refuse to question, we are saying that school size is solely a public finance issue and that we are unwilling to pay for what is best for our children.

Questioning our views of school size and seeking to eliminate school communities full of strangers will be the greatest legacy of the Columbine victims.
Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, June 1999

VI. Is Smaller Better Only for Big Cities?

The debate over school size urged in last month's installment of this series is happening. Maybe the best proof is that *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* have offered smaller schools as a solution to school violence. Politicians are speaking to the issue. *Vice President Gore* recently urged school officials to "stop herding all students ... into overcrowded, factory-style high schools." Finally, praise comes from child development and mental health professionals. *Dr. James Gabarino* of Cornell University and a noted author recently said, "The most despicable thing we've done to American teen-agers is put them in large high schools."

Granted, this may be a short-term reaction to recent events. But many school districts, particularly ones in big cities, seem to have understood the message long before pundits and politicians. School districts in Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles jumped on the small school bandwagon in recent years, opening high schools with student populations of 500 or less or splitting existing schools into smaller "schools within a school."

Considerable obstacles still remain. For example, a citizen's council in Lincoln, Nebraska, recommended that two new high schools be built for 1,500 students each, rather than for smaller enrollments. Why? Larger schools will provide access to higher-level competitive sports. Is it prudent, or even moral, to endanger the health and education of a majority of students for only a handful who will benefit from higher-level athletics? Obviously not, but this illustrates the barriers to developing schools that are truly the best for all children. *Richard Kraft* of the University of Colorado says that large schools are good for extraordinarily talented children – the best athletes, artists, or academics. Yet those students make up only 10 to 20 percent of a student body. In large schools, all the rest risk being lost or left out.

Another barrier is public policy that does not allow for the adequate and equitable funding of small, rural schools and that encourages the consolidation of rural schools into ever larger units. We cannot rationally applaud the move toward smaller schools in metropolitan areas, while promoting a financing system that punishes small schools in rural areas. If, as research shows, small schools are virtuous in terms of safety, achievement, and participation, then we must allow those size-related virtues to take hold and remain everywhere, not simply in those areas that can afford reforms.
Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, July 1999

VII. Achievement

When we began this series, we said that "efficient" schools teach children well and safely to graduation. The past few months we have demonstrated that small schools are safer than and graduate more of their students than large schools. It is time to complete the puzzle by considering achievement.

Granted, measuring achievement is more difficult and subjective. Bright, motivated, and well taught students will likely succeed in any school. But are there advantages to smallness that lead to academic achievement? Policymakers assume that large schools are superior due to technology, resources, and curriculums that provide a deeper and broader education.

Yet a review of research literature exposes this assumption as a fraud. Out of 22 major studies examining academic achievement by school size, none finds that large schools are superior to small schools. Fourteen studies find equivalent achievement, and 8 studies find small schools superior.

Recent actions by two states reinforce these findings. Nearly 70 percent of Nebraska's 1998-99 Quality Education Incentive grantees were small, rural schools. A mandatory factor in this program is college admission test scores for a system's students above the statewide average. While not the only factor that demonstrates a quality education, it does provide a measure of high achievement in small schools.

In Vermont, the recently published *Report of the Small Schools Group* analyzed the relative costs and benefits of large and small schools in the state. The report found that students in small schools performed as well as or better than students in large schools.

The assumption about the superiority of large schools melts away when considered by educators. A survey of school administrators in the report found that children who attended small schools are better prepared for further education than a vast number of those schooled at large elementary schools.

A common policy debate is over the "optimum" size for schools. One strain of research provides recommendations for "optimum input" size – the best size to minimize costs. Another line concerns "optimum output" size – the best size for achievement and learning. Not surprisingly, the "optimum output" size is smaller by half.

The choice is ours on what size of school to buy. If you believe that schools should be directed to the best interests of children and their learning, tell your school board, legislators, and fellow citizens about the need to create and maintain small schools.

Source: Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter, August 1999

References

The following are data sources, literature searches and bibliographies used in the preparation of *The Case for Small Schools* series.

Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97, U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

Report of the Small Schools Group, Vermont Department of Education, 1998.

School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance, Kathleen Cotton, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997.

Review of Research on School District Size, Sibyll Carnochan, University of California, Los Angeles, 1997.

The Academic Effectiveness of Small-Scale Schooling: An Update, Craig Howley, ERIC, Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1994.

Current Literature on Small Schools, Mary Anne Raywid, ERIC, Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1999.

Rural School Consolidation and Student Learning, Jim Fanning, ERIC, Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1995.

"Reaching for Equity," Mary Anne Raywid, *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 55, No. 4, December 1997/January 1998.

Ongoing Dilemmas of School Size: A Short Story, Craig Howley, ERIC, Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1996.

What Difference Do Local Schools Make? A Literature Review and Bibliography, Priscilla Salant and Anita Waller, Annenberg Rural Challenge Policy Program, 1998.

About the Author

Jon Bailey is the Farm and Community Policy Program Leader at the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska. He is a graduate of Creighton Univesity, with a BA in Political Science and a JD from the Creighton University School of Law. After 12 years of practicing law in his hometown of Sterling, Colorado, he obtained a Master in Public Policy from the College of William and Mary. Immediately before coming to the Center, he worked in Washington, DC as a Special Assistant to the Associate Commissioner for Policy at the Social Security Administration and a Legislative Fellow for US Senator Kent Conrad of North Dakota. Jon and his wife Ginger live on a farm near Walthill, and have two children who attend a small school in Bancroft, Nebraska.

About the Series

The Case for Small Schools was a series of articles that appeared in the Center for Rural Affairs monthly newsletter from January to August 1999. While the series was running, we received numerous calls and letters from people who were using the information for a variety of purposes – legislative proposals and debate, school board proceedings, letters to local newspapers, Sunday School lessons. At the request of many people, we decided to place *The Case for Small Schools* series into one place, one document that contains all the information, facts, evidence and arguments of the effectiveness and viability of small schools. For additional information or copies of this report, please contact Jon Bailey at the Center.

For additional information or copies of this report, please contact:

Jon Bailey, Farm and Community Policy Program Leader
Center for Rural Affairs
PO Box 406
Walthill NE 68067
Phone: 402/846-5428 E-mail:jonb@cfra.org
www.cfra.org

Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private, non-profit organization working to strengthen small businesses, family farms and ranches, and rural communities through action oriented programs addressing social, economic, and environmental issues.